

Introducing Basic Linguistic Concepts in E4BT



English vocabulary has a remarkable **range**, **flexibility** and **adaptability**. Thanks to the periods of contact with what are considered foreign languages and its readiness to coin new words out of old elements, English seems to have far more words in its core vocabulary than other languages.

For example, alongside **skin/leather/hide** (from Anglo-Saxon) we find **peel/layer** (from French) and **pelt/epidermis** (from Latin). There are many such sets of words which add greatly to our opportunities to express subtle shades of meaning at various levels of style and register.

Look at the following examples:

- ✧ The main test to diagnose **skin** cancer is to take a sample (biopsy) of the area.
- ✧ A **skin** allergy is when skin becomes irritated because the immune system reacted to something that is usually harmless.
- ✧ a **leather** jacket.
- ✧ Each volume is bound in genuine **leather**.
- ✧ Elephants have a very tough **hide**.

- ✧ orange/lemon **peel**
- ✧ Ducks have a thick **layer** of fat to keep them warm.
- ✧ Sunlight thickens the outer **layer** of the skin.

- ✧ a bed covered with beaver **pelts**.
- ✧ The researchers reported that the transgenic **epidermis** was stable, did not blister or itch, and healed normally.
- ✧ The human **epidermis** is the crucial tissue that produces a sturdy, flexible and self-repairing barrier between our internal body organs and our environment.

Sets of lexical units that have identical, or near identical, meanings are referred to as **synonyms**. Theoretically they can take each other's place in any context but in practice there are always differences.



DISEASE AND ITS SYNONYMS

disease, illness, sickness, ailment, complaint, disorder, condition, infection, bug, malady, (all refer to medical problems affecting the body or mental health). Note how they differ in the words they occur with (their **collocations** or **word-clusters**). *Disease* is a medical problem affecting humans, animals or plants, often caused by infection and affecting the organs, and is often found in compounds such as *blood disease, heart disease* and *liver disease*. *Illness* is used to talk about both more severe and more minor medical problems, and those that affect mental health, such as in *mental illness, serious/severe/chronic illnesses*. *Sickness* can be a particular type of illness or disease (*travel sickness, seasickness, altitude sickness*); *ailment* is an illness that is not very serious (*childhood ailments*); *complaint* is an illness, especially one that is not serious, and often affecting a particular part of the body (*skin complaint, chest complaint*); *disorder* is an illness that causes a part of the body to stop functioning correctly (*kidney/bowel disorder*), it is not infectious and is used most frequently with words relating to mental problems (*eating disorders, personality disorders*); *condition* is a medical problem that you have for a long time because it is not possible to cure it (*genetic/untreatable condition*); *infection* is an illness that is caused by bacteria or a virus and that affects one part of the body (*ear infection, urinary tract/respiratory infection*); *bug* is an infectious illness that is usually fairly mild but spreads easily from person to person (a flu bug); *malady* is an old-fashioned noun to name any disorder or disease of the body, especially one that is chronic or deep-seated (a *fatal malady*); it may refer also to serious problems in a society or situation (poverty, homelessness, and other *social maladies*).

It is usual to say that synonyms share their **denotation**, or central meaning, while they differ in their **connotations**, or their associated or secondary meaning.

N.B. – the **denotation** of an expression is its context-independent, **objective** basic and explicit meaning, also called descriptive meaning, and contrasts with **connotation**, which is the variable, **subjective**, implicit, often emotive part of its meaning.

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The names of English language words

Parts of speech (or word-classes):

- ✧ **nouns**¹: biology, cell, disease, flu, outbreak, oxygen, scientist, vaccine, virus;
- ✧ **verbs**²: (to) infect, (to) spread, (to) tell;
- ✧ **adjectives**³: infectious, interesting, mild, wild;
- ✧ **adverbs**: carefully, highly, slowly⁵;

LEXICAL or
CONTENT WORDS⁴

- ✧ **prepositions**: in, at, on, after;
- ✧ **pronouns**: me, you, them, who;
- ✧ **articles and determiners**: the, this, my, some;
- ✧ **conjunctions**⁶: and, or, but;
- ✧ **interjections**⁸: wow! yeah! no!!

GRAMMATICAL or
FUNCTION WORDS⁷

¹ Both personal, common and collective nouns.

² Only **full verbs** – or **main verbs** – are considered lexical words, whereas **auxiliary verbs** and **modal verbs** are classified as grammatical words.

³ Only adjectives as **qualifiers** are considered lexical words.

⁴ Also called **open class of words**.

⁵ Only **adverbs of manner** – i.e., those deriving from qualifiers – are considered lexical words.

⁶ Also called **connectives** or **linking words**.

⁷ Also called **closed class of words**.

⁸ Also called **exclamations**.